



Literature for Nonhumans

Gabriel Gudding

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This wildly imaginative cultural takedown of Illinois history delivers an extraordinary lesson in humanism, animal stewardship, and inner rage. Very, very few poets have Gabriel Gudding's intellectual chops, and his wordplay herein—some prose poetry, some lyric essay, some indescribable—is blistering and breathtaking. An acclaimed and prolific writer, poet, and translator, Gudding teaches at Illinois State University.

Our Fellow Drivers as the Analogs of Animals

Consider how readily we take our fellow drivers to be idiots. We project onto them some kind of deficiency: a malignancy, a stupidity, a naivety, a cognitive primitivism, an imbalance of emotion—even a subjectless egoism and a moral insufficiency. Sometimes just a flatness of being: when they are not malign or annoying or stupid, other drivers are to us simply drab, ignorable.

If a driver delays too long at a stop sign, if he broaches his turn too early, moves out of order, causes gridlock by the self-serving insertion of his car into the crux of an intersection, or if he otherwise does something to ensure his own timely departure from a tangle while deepening the entanglement of others, the being in the car becomes stupid, and selfish, as selfish is a subset of stupid; and as the being is stupid, it's at once cunning and easily fooled; and because selfish, he's greedy, impatient, petulant. In sum he becomes a total jackass. ...

How is it that by merely cloaking the human body in sheet metal, hiding the shapes and movements of this person's body and face, we can so readily animalize members of our own species?

The question's instructive. If we can with such facility do this to members of our own species, famed (among ourselves anyway) for our brilliance, by erecting a painted sheet of shaped metal between us, think about how easily—and how erroneously—we'll do this to others who are hidden behind the varying shapes and features of their bodies.

We treat other animals like we do our fellow drivers: as flat

and hypothetical beings. A hypothetical being is one that we can see exists but whose existence is insufficient in itself to merit full inclusion in our attentional space, insufficient because it does not to us have an interesting mind. And it does not have an interesting mind because it stands in the way of our wants. ...

If we can occasionally glimpse that we are this stupid and this erroneously begrudging about members of our own species, I wonder if we could consider how selfish and inane we are when we knowingly put our own pleasure before the needs, families, horrors, and sorrows of the other beings who we refuse to see as fellow travelers.

MATT SUTHERLAND (Winter 2016)

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